

Georgetown Visitation Convent
1500 35th Street, N.W.
(Georgetown)
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-211

HABS,
DC,
GEO,
147-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

GEORGETOWN VISITATION CONVENT

HABS,
DC,
GEO,
147-

Location: 1500 35th Street, N.W. (Georgetown), Washington, D.C.

Present Owners and Occupants: Sisters of the Visitation (1969).

Present Use: Visitation Convent and Catholic School for girls (1969).

Significance: Established in 1799, the Georgetown Visitation Convent was the first Catholic school for girls and the first Visitation Convent in the United States. Daughters of several Presidents and other nationally prominent persons have been educated here. The complex includes twenty buildings of different styles dating from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Dates of erection: The Chapel of the Sacred Heart was erected in 1821. The Academy Building was built in 1873. The "Slave Cabin" was built in the late eighteenth century as part of the Threlkeld estate.
2. Architect: Academy building: Norris G. Starkweather.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Convent is located in Square 1251, Lot 800, Square 1252, Lot 800 and Square 1276, Lots 800, 802 and 803 in Washington D.C. (formerly Square 81, Lots 149-160, Square 82, Lots 137-147, Square 105, Lots 1-5, 172, 174, 176, 178 and 180, Square 106, Lots 1-5, 182, 184, 186, 188, and 190 in Threlkeld's Addition to Georgetown.). The original address was 89 Fayette Street.

The convent and school stand on land bought by the Sisters of the Visitation from Henry and John Threlkeld in the nineteenth century.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

In 1793 three Sisters of the Order of St. Clare, Marie de la Marche (Abbess of the Order of St. Clare), Celeste la Blonde de Rochefaucault, and Marie de St. Luc, fled France because of the Revolution and settled in Georgetown. (Lathrop; Jackson).

The Poor Clares, as they were known, rented two houses on the corner of Third (P) Street and Fayette (35th) Street from John Threlkeld in 1798. There was a stream, referred to in early deeds as "the branch," coursing through the yard. Then, with a \$300 loan from St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, they bought the property in which they were living and running

a school (Naughten). According to one account, "The Poor Clares attempted to keep a school as a means of support; but their poverty was so extreme, and their life so rigorous, that the scholars were mostly frightened away." (Lathrop).

In 1799, Father Leonard Neale, S.J., became President of Georgetown College. He brought with him three women, Alice Lalor, Mrs. McDermott and Mrs. Sharpe, who had taught school and led a religious life in Philadelphia, and "...domiciled them for a time with the three Poor Clares... who had set up a little convent near the College..." (Lathrop; Naughten; Alumnae of the Convent). The three women boarded there and taught at the Convent for several months before moving to a nearby house which Father Neale bought for them. There the "Pious Ladies," as they were called, opened their own school "...which was hailed with delight by the Catholics of the neighborhood and received solid encouragement from them." (Lathrop).

By 1805 the school of the "St. Clares" was no longer operating, for the Abbess had died and Celeste la Blonde de Rochefaucault, who had inherited the property, decided to return to France. She sold the property to Father Neale for \$4000 to be paid in five installments. Records show that the last installment was made through an agent in Baltimore in 1808. (Naughten).

In 1805 the "Pious Ladies" moved into the house the Poor Clares had owned and continued their school. Mrs. Sharpe (Sister Ignatia) had died three years earlier, during the summer of 1802. In 1808 the property was deeded to Miss Alice Lalor and "two Irish co-workers" by Father Neale. (Proctor)

The property which was conveyed to "Alice Lalor, Maria McDermott and Mary Neale" consisted of "...the entire Square of ground laid off by George Fenwick in a plat called Jn. Threlkeld's Addition to George Town...all that square or parcel of land...bounded on the north by Fourth Street (now Volta Place) on the east by Fayette Street (now 35th) on the south by Third Street (now P) and on the west by Gay Street (now 35th) together with...buildings..."

The deed describes Bishop Neale's provision for the use of the property:

"...whereas the said Neale has established on the said premises a community of Ladies whom he stiles Sisters of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary, devoted by voluntary engagements to perpetuate a regular education of their sex particularly of thoses of the poorer classes ...the said Leonard Neale for many reasons, him thereunto moving and particularly with a view of securing to the aforesaid Community a suitable and sufficiently extensive plot of ground to perfect its establishment and to carry into effect the aforesaid system and plan of education..." (Land Records)

When Bishop Neale's term as President of Georgetown College expired in 1808, he moved next door to the Convent and continued to supervise and guide its growth. (Lathrop)

The Convent was recognized in 1816 by Pope Pius VII as an Order of the Visitation. Miss Lalor, as Sister Teresa, became Mother Superior. (Truett). A year later Father Neale died and was buried in the crypt beneath the chapel of the Convent. Father Joseph Pierre Picot de Cloriviere assumed the spiritual guidance for the Convent. (Rutledge)

Father Cloriviere was largely responsible for the expansion of the Convent and the school. He not only raised standards of the school, but contributed financially to it from funds received from the sale of his property in France. (Alumnae of the Convent) This support was a particular boon during the economic slump in Georgetown during the 1920s.

Gradually the Convent acquired more land from the Threlkeld estate to provide for its expanding facilities. Under Father Cloriviere's direction considerable construction was undertaken and the educational activities broadened. Beyond the existing elementary and high school program, which was based on tuition, in 1819 the Sisters organized a free school known as "The Benevolent School" (or St. Joseph's School) for needy young children in the neighborhood.

That same year a wing was added to the infirmary; in 1821 the Chapel of the Sacred Heart was dedicated; two years later, in 1823, a building for the boarding school was constructed. (Alumnae of the Convent)

By 1824, however, the Convent was in such financial straits that it was almost forced to close. Relief came in the form of advance payments for two pupils by their father, John B. Lasaler, a wealthy merchant from New York. (Jackson)

The school, known as "The Young Ladies Academy of the Visitation of Georgetown," continued to grow despite financial hardships. In 1828 Congress granted it a charter, approved by President John Quincy Adams and certified by the Secretary of State, Henry Clay. President Adams gave the graduation address that year and recorded in his diary that at the ceremony he had seen Wilhelmina (Sister Stanislaus) Jones, daughter of Commodore John Jacob Jones, hero of the War of 1812. President Adams also distributed prizes that day to the three daughters of Empress Ana Maria Huarte de Iturbide, widow of Emperor Agustin de Iturbide of Mexico. (Alumnae of the Convent)

The 1830 City Directory of Georgetown furnishes a lively description of the school and its operation.

"He [Rev. Mr. Cloriviere] also reared a building for the education of young ladies, better adapted for the purpose than the one in which the Academy was first undertaken. Soon after, the Rev. Mr. Wheeler erected an odeum, or Hall of Exercises, neatly executed in the Ionic style. The sphere of tuition was enlarged by him, and an extensive philosophical apparatus was imported and placed in the odeum.

The reputation of the Ladies' Academy having brought to it more inmates than could be conveniently accommodated, Mr. Wheeler also enlarged the Institution, by adding a compact building to the one erected by Mr. Cloriviere. By this means the Academy is now provided with all the conveniences and arrangements to be met with in the best regulated establishments of this kind, at home or abroad; and may lodge with ease 150 pupils."

Further expansion occurred in 1832 when the east wing of the monastery was added.

Richard Jackson, author and resident of Georgetown, wrote in 1879 of how the Convent grounds appeared to him when he was a young man. He described the extensive buildings on an area covering almost the whole square from Fayette (35th) Street to Langan (36th) Street and from Third (P) Street to Fourth (Volta Place) Street. He told of the gardens and orchards "...where are cultivated all the vegetables and fruits used in the institution." He described graphically the lovely grounds "...laid out in serpentine walks, around which the ladies promenade for exercise." (Jackson)

(In 1843 "Lalor House" fronting on Fayette (35th) Street was purchased for St. Joseph's Benevolent School; it is now a residence hall and guest house. In 1857 a south wing was added to the monastery. (Alumnae of the Convent)

After the Civil war the Convent prospered and expanded. In 1873 the original school building was replaced by a large building to be devoted to classrooms and administrative offices.

In 1891 the building presently known as the "Lodge" was erected as a laundry; it has since been converted into a faculty-student lounge. A barn was built in 1895 and has recently been remodeled to serve as a library.

In 1899 a fire caused considerable damage, necessitating some major reconstruction. Additional floors were added to the academy and monastery buildings at this time.

During the twentieth century further expansion and construction occurred to meet the increasing demands of the school. A junior college, which was to exist for 25 years, was established in 1919. In 1921 Fennessy Hall was built as a combination residence and classroom structure. The gymnasium was built in 1934. (Alumnae of the Convent) When a tennis court was built in 1939, ruins of Burleith, home of Henry Threlkeld, built in 1716, and burned shortly after the Revolution, were discovered. (Truett)

During the Second World War a housing development was established on the grounds of the Visitation Convent. Anti-aircraft batteries were installed at the top of "The Farm;" a recreational lounge was set up and equipped by the alumnae for soldiers who were on duty on the Convent premises.

After the war the U.S. Government returned the property to the Convent. In 1959 another classroom building, St. Joseph Hall, was constructed to meet the increased enrollment of students. (Alumnae of the Convent; The Washington Post-Times Herald)

The more famous pupils of the Academy have included Pearl, President Tyler's daughter; Mary Abigail, daughter of President Fillmore; Harriet Lane, President Buchanan's niece; Mary Saunders, daughter-in-law of President Harrison. Virginia, daughter of General Winfield Scott, died as a nun at Visitation. (The Sunday Star) More recently, Caroline Kennedy, daughter of President John Kennedy, took her catechism at the Convent.

B. Bibliography:

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Prepared by Volunteers for the
Commission of Fine Arts
Washington, D.C.
1969

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

CHAPEL:

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This cream colored stucco building is an unusual combination of Ionic and Tudor styles. Its verticality contrasts with the solidity of the monastery on the south and the academy building on the north. This is the earliest extant building that was erected as part of the convent.
2. Condition of fabric: Good, well maintained.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Approximately 36' by 46'. Three bays across 35th Street facade. The building is three stories high. There are four Ionic pilasters equally dividing the facade and supporting the full-width triangular pediment.
2. Foundations: Brick foundation walls and massive arches in the crypt.
3. Wall construction: Brick with white stucco covering.
4. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The front entrance has a pair of doors with four pyramidal raised panels and a Tudor-arched stained glass transom light. It is surrounded with a wide roll molding with a keystone in the form of a Sacred Heart, all in stucco. This door has been closed and is not used as an entrance.
 - b. Windows and shutters: Windows in general are fixed stained-glass except the top windows on the east facade, which are imitation stained-glass. The windows have flattened Tudor arches and heavy roll moldings of stucco. The lower windows also have keystones in the form of the Sacred Heart. There are large pictorial stained glass windows on each side of the altar bay.

5. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Gable; ridge running east-west.
- b. Framing: Wood (assumed).
- c. Cornice: Wood; full Ionic entablature with bedmold, dentils, and cyma recta moldings.
- d. Towers: There is on the south side a belfry, outside the original rectangle of the chapel building but now enclosed within the monastery building. The square tower extends slightly above the roof of the monastery building and its upper portions, originally wood, have been covered with brick patterned stamped metal. There is a very low plain wood railing and steep, slate-covered, four sided spire.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The first floor has the chancel in the west end with the altar in a three-sided bay. On the south is the nun's seating area behind a screen of gothic arches, and on the north, behind a wall painted to match the arches of the screen opposite, is a small spiral stair to the gallery above. This gallery around the north, east, and south sides of the chapel is supported on four smooth Tuscan columns. The crypt below has a single central tomb, brick-arched burial vaults along the north and east walls, and several graves in the floor.
2. Stairways: There is one very small curved stair just north of the chancel area leading up to the gallery. It ascends in a clockwise direction (east to west) along the curved south wall of the stair-hall to a pair of winders in the northwest corner, and from there ascends in a straight run to the gallery.
3. Flooring: Oak parquet, with white marble in the chancel area.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster. Painted gray with white columns and trim, and gold decorations and highlights.
5. Doorways and doors: Doors in general have four raised vertical panels and simple molded trim.
6. Decorative features and trim: The white and beige marble altar is the dominant decorative feature of the chapel. It is an elaborate gothic construction with reredos, situated in the center of a three-sided bay in the west end. There are pictorial stained glass windows on each side, while over the altar hangs a large painting, "Jesus of Bethany," an 1825 gift to the monastery from Charles X of France. A group of four slender gothic arches forms a screen for the nun's area on the south of the sanctuary and is repeated at the gallery level above. The upper group of arches is repeated on the north,

while the lower level is repeated in blind arches with geometrically painted infilling. The gallery railing is made of solid panels. The ceiling is a shallow vault and is also painted with geometric designs in grays and gold. The plaster Stations of the Cross are early twentieth century.

7. Hardware: Simple late nineteenth century and twentieth century brass.
8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: Radiators.
 - b. Lighting: Modern incandescent spot lights shine on the altar area and provide general illumination; the hook for an earlier sanctuary lamp is visible in the ceiling above the altar.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: This building is between the monastery and the main academy building along the west side of 35th Street. Its original entrance, now closed, was in the center of the east side, and its west end faces on the courtyard of the complex.
2. Enclosures: A continuation of the ornamental cast-iron fence of the academy building runs along the sidewalk in front of the chapel as well. There is no gate at the chapel entrance.
3. Landscaping: Low shrubbery in planting area along the sidewalk.

ACADEMY BUILDING:

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Built during the 1870s, this building dominates this block of 35th Street. It is a symmetrical rectangular building employing elements of Italianate and Second Empire Styles.
2. Condition of fabric: Very good, well maintained.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Approximately 110' by 85'. Three-and-one-half stories high, plus full basement. There are shallow projecting pavilions in the centers of the east and north facades.
2. Foundations: Stone under exterior walls, massive brick arches throughout basement area.
3. Wall construction: Brick bearing walls. The east elevation has shaped brick ornamentation including belt courses, quoins, and label moldings.
4. Porches: Across the west front of the academy building at first floor level is a covered porch connecting the monastery, the academy, the dormitories, and the infirmary. This is a wooden, shed-roofed porch supported on thin 12" diameter brick columns.
5. Chimneys: One, approximately 6' by 6', recently enlarged.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The main front doors, set within a deep paneled vestibule, have two glazed panels above two raised panels, with matching sidelights. Heavy brick roll moldings surround openings. There is an elaborate wood-and-stamped-metal arched canopy supported on scrolled brackets at the front entrance.
 - b. Windows and shutters: First floor windows have two-over-two-light double hung wood sash with segmental heads, except those on each side of the entrance, which have semi-circular heads. The central and south windows on the east facade light the Odeon and are two stories high. They have for the most part one-over-one light sash with diamond-pane leaded imitation stained glass and semicircular heads. The windows to the north on the east facade are connected with spandrel panels to give the effect of two-story high windows. These tall windows across the front are grouped three-one-three and have ornate label moldings and cresting. The windows on the remaining sides have two-over-two-light double hung sash with segmental heads.

There are no exterior shutters, but several windows on the top floor retain the inside louvered shutters original to the entire building.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Mansard roof over entire building; bowed mansard at the central pavilion, slightly higher. Steep pitch has hexagonal slates, low pitch has rectangular slates. Sheet metal hips and ridges with cast iron ornamental cresting.
- b. Framing: Wood trusses and heavy timbers.
- c. Cornice: Wood and stamped metal; a heavy crown mold with a broad, smooth soffit, supported by four different kinds of brackets apparently made of stamped metal.
- d. Dormers: Most of the dormers have paired four-over-four light double hung semi-circular headed sash with wood and stamped metal ornamental surrounds and cornices, and painted metal roofs. The central dormer on the east facade has four double hung sash windows - two short ones flanking two tall ones - topped with a central circular sash, and is framed in elaborate wood and stamped metal ornamentation.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: The first floor has an entrance vestibule in the center of the east side, leading into a very broad transverse corridor running north-south. Adjoining the vestibule on the north is a small office, beyond which are two parlors, each of which is divided north to south by the remains of enclosure screens, only recently removed. Adjoining the vestibule on the south is a similarly divided larger parlor, beyond which is a room currently used as a vestry for the chapel and as a display area for various articles associated with the early days of the Convent. Across the west side of the corridor are large classrooms, now converted to offices. At the north end of the corridor is the very broad staircase.
- b. Second floor: The "Odeon," a large two-story assembly room, occupies the south two-thirds of the second floor. The north end contains the stairs, lavatories, and circulation space.
- c. Third floor: The north end of the third floor contains the stairs, circulation space, and two classrooms; the remainder of this floor is the upper part of the "Odeon."

- d. Fourth floor: The fourth floor has, in addition to the broad central corridor, two narrower parallel corridors. There are classrooms in the northeast and northwest corners, many music practice rooms along the outside walls of both small corridors, and a block of storage rooms between the corridors.
 - e. Basement: There is an equipment room in the northeast corner, a snack bar and storage rooms across the east side, and wardrobe storage rooms across the west side.
- 2. Stairways: There is one stairway at the north end of the building. It is very broad and ascends along the west wall to a landing, then along the north wall to a landing, then along the east wall to the floor above. Turned balusters and heavy handrail continue to the top floor. In recent years the stairs have been reinforced with steel beams and the soffits replastered, but the later additions are unobtrusive. There are plaster niches at the landings containing statuary.
 - 3. Flooring: The corridors in general have oak parquet in a basket weave pattern, although the first floor corridor has a new oak strip floor. The original strip flooring remains in most rooms. The parlors on the first floor have every third board stained dark, a pattern which is repeated in the wainscot. Floors in the basement are modern resilient tile.
 - 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Painted plaster walls throughout; a few pressed metal ceilings in the basement and upper classrooms, acoustical tile in the Odeon, painted plaster ceilings in the remaining areas.
 - 5. Doorways and doors: Doors in general have four panels, the upper two frequently filled with obscure glass. There are large sliding pocket doors dividing the offices on the first floor. Similar doors with imitation stained-glass inserts leading into the Odeon.
 - 6. Decorative features and trim: Trim throughout the lower three floors is wide and flat, with a deeply undercut backband. The top floor has a one-piece beaded flattened ogee trim. First floor wainscots have a molded cap on 3" beaded boards with every third board stained dark. All trim in the office area has been painted, but the varnished natural wood remains throughout most of the building.
- In the Odeon there is a very large mural on canvas, the central figure of which is St. Cecilia. Painted by a Miss Shay in 1916, this mural is hidden by the curtains of the stage platform area.
- 7. Hardware: There is much original simple brass hardware.

8. Mechanical equipment:

- a. Heating: There are cast iron radiators throughout.
- b. Lighting: The main corridor on the first floor has several gas chandeliers, probably original, which have been converted to electricity. The Odeon has a very large (8 to 10 feet in diameter) chandelier made up of both gas-burning candles in groups of three on the upper branches and electric light bulbs pointing downward on the lower branches. Electric lighting has replaced all other original fixtures.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Located on the west side of 35th Street between P Street and Volta Place, the academy building is the principal entrance to the Convent. Except for the Convent and the Volta Bureau across the street, the neighborhood is one of private residences, both free standing and row-type, of varying ages.
2. Enclosures: There is a cast-iron fence around the planting area in front of the building. A high brick wall begins at the northeast corner of the academy building and continues around the entire complex.
3. Walks: Concrete and brick.
4. Landscaping: There are simple low shrubs in the planting area enclosed within the iron fence along the 35th Street facade. Trees and lawns throughout the complex are very well maintained.
5. Outbuildings: There are approximately twenty other buildings in the complex. Some of the earlier buildings on the site are the monastery (1832), the chapel (1821), the infirmary west building (1819), the dormitories (1829 and 1838), and a small building, sometimes called the "Slave Cabin," which was on the site when the Order purchased it.

Prepared by The Office of
Walter G. Peter, Jr., AIA
Architect
March 18, 1969

SLAVE CABIN:

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This small, late eighteenth century brick building has been much restored in the present century. Although it is commonly called "The Slave Cabin," it was more probably the overseer's office for "Burleith," the Threlkeld estate which stood nearby. It is now used for recreation purposes by the students at the Convent.
2. Condition of fabric: Good, fairly well maintained.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Approximately 13'-6" by 23'. One story high.
2. Foundations: None visible; brick assumed.
3. Wall construction: Simple brick bearing walls with irregular bond courses, much repaired.
4. Chimneys: One recent brick replacement 7' by 3' on the east end; contains an exterior fireplace as well as an interior one.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: There are two exterior doors, one in the center of the south elevation, the other in the center of the north. Both are made with two thicknesses of vertical boards sandwiching a layer of building felt, all held together with wrought iron thumbblatches and wood bolts. The north is a single leaf door, while the south is a Dutch door; both are dilapidated.
 - b. Windows and shutters: There are two windows in the south wall and one in the west. All have six-over-six-light double hung wood sash and flat brick sills. They are all twentieth century replacements.
6. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: Gable; ridge running east-west. Modern concrete shingles made to simulate wood shingles.
 - b. Framing: New 4" by 4" rafters at 24" on center, with very wide sheathing boards. The original 7" by 7" attic joists are in place, possibly rearranged in the rehabilitation of the building.
 - c. Cornice: There is no cornice other than a plain 6" board which rakes at the gable ends.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: There is one plain rectangular room with a fireplace at the east end. The roof framing is visible through the open beams of the attic level, which is not floored. There is one door in the center of the south front flanked by windows, one door in the center of the north wall, and one window in the center of the west end.
2. Flooring: Brick laid flat in a basket-weave pattern, not original.
3. Wall and ceiling finish: Walls are white washed brick; the roof framing is exposed.
4. Hardware: Both doors have wrought-iron thumbatches, wrought-iron straps with heart-shaped ends, and wrought-iron HL hinges.
5. Heating: The rebuilt fireplace provides the only heat in the building. It is a simple brick construction with a plain board mantel shelf.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building faces south across the tennis courts at the northwest corner of the Convent property.
2. Walks: There is a brick walk around the building, but no access walks across the lawn.
3. Landscaping: Well-tended lawns surround the small house.

Prepared by The Office of
Walter G. Peter, Jr., AIA
Architect
March 28, 1969

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared as part of a project to record structures in the western part of the Georgetown Historic District in Washington, D.C. The project was conducted by the Commission of Fine Arts with the cooperation of the Historic American Buildings Survey. The resulting documentation was donated to HABS by the Commission and published in 1970 in HABS Selections Number 6, "Georgetown Architecture - Northwest: Northwest Washington, District of Columbia". Research for the project was conducted by volunteers under the supervision of Ms. Nancy Black, staff member of the Commission of Fine Arts. Architectural information was prepared by The Office of Walter G. Peter, AIA. The photographs were taken by J. Alexander. The data was edited and prepared for transmittal to the Library of Congress by HABS architectural historian Emily J. Harris in 1979.